AND THERE CAME A DAY, A DAY UNLIKE ANY OTHER, WHEN EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES OPENED THEIR DOORS TO TEACH THE NEXT GENERATION! ON THAT DAY, THE AVENGERS ACADEMY WAS BORN, TO TRAIN YOUNG ADULTS TO FIGHT THE FOES NO SINGLE SUPER HERO COULD WITHSTAND!

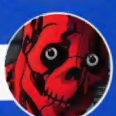
AVENGERS ACADEMY

FINESSE

PHOTOGRAPHIC FIGHTER. ALL HEAD, NO HEART.

HAZMAT

HUMAN TOXIC SPILL. CAUSTIC PERSONALITY.



METTLE

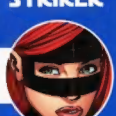
STEEL-SKINNED POWERHOUSE. ARMORED SHELL PROTECTING INNER FEELINGS.

REPTIL

DINOSAUR MORPHER. FUTURE HERO OR NAIVE OPTIMIST?

STRIKER

ELECTRIC DYNAMO. SELF-PROMOTES THROUGH SHOCK TACTICS.



VEIL

VARIABLE GAS GENERATOR. UNSEEN POTENTIAL... UNTIL SHE DISCORPORATES.

DURING HIS DARK REIGN AS DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL SECURITY, NORMAN OSBORN RECRUITED YOUNG SUPERHUMANS--OFTEN BY FORCE--SO HE COULD MOLD THEM IN HIS IMAGE. THEIR "TRAINING" WAS PAINFUL AND TRAUMATIC.

THE AVENGERS EVENTUALLY DEFEATED AND IMPRISONED OSBORN. ORIGINAL AVENGER, HANK PYM, THEN FORMED AVENGERS ACADEMY, TO HELP GUIDE THESE YOUNG SUPERHUMANS IN THE HEROIC TRADITION OF EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES.

THE STUDENTS' EXCITEMENT OVER BEING CHOSEN WAS QUICKLY SHATTERED WHEN THEY SECRETLY LEARNED THE TRUTH: THEY WERE SELECTED NOT BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE GREATEST POTENTIAL TO BE HEROES... BUT BECAUSE THEY'RE THE ONES MOST AT RISK TO BECOME VILLAINS.

NOW THAT THE AVENGERS ACADEMY HAS GONE PUBLIC VIA A STUNT ORCHESTRATED BY THE FAME-HUNGRY STRIKER, A BURDEN OF RESPONSIBILITY HAS FALLEN TO REPTIL, THE NEWLY APPOINTED CLASS LEADER. THE TEAM HAS HAD LITTLE TIME TO CELEBRATE, THOUGH, AS AN ATTACK FROM THE ABSORBING MAN TESTED EVERYONE, INCLUDING HANK PYM, WHO HAS ONCE AGAIN TAKEN UP THE MANTLE OF GIANT-MAN!

IN ADDITION TO CHANGING HIS IDENTITY, PYM HAD PLANNED TO BRING THE ORIGINAL WASP, HIS EX-WIFE JANET VAN DYNE, BACK TO LIFE. IN THE END HANK DECIDED AGAINST THE ACTION AND LEFT HER IN STASIS IN UNDER-SPACE. AN ACT WITNESSED BY VEIL...

NOTE: THIS STORY TAKES PLACE BEFORE AVENGERS #7.

GIANT-MAN

SIZE-CHANGING SCIENTIST SUPREME.

TIGRA

CAT WOMAN. ENHANCED STRENGTH, AGILITY AND ATTITUDE.

QUICKSILVER

SURLY SPEEDSTER.

JUSTICE

TELEKINETIC MORAL COMPASS.

SPEEDBALL

KINETIC ENERGY MANIPULATOR. TRYING TO BOUNCE BACK.

JOCASTA

SYNTHETIC BEING. LOYAL TO GIANT-MAN... OR ULTRON?

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AFTER SCHOOL SPECIAL

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Hello, True Believers! This month we received a thoughtful letter that I had to trim for length; Mr Robbins, I hope you feel the points you made remain intact.

What can I say? I'm a fan. Over the past few years I've bought more and more comics based on writers over characters, and your great, character-driven work has put you near the top of my list. I've done everything I can to help the book, praising it to everyone, posting about it on Facebook, etc. And I'm happy to say that sales have been quite good at the local comics shop I help out at on Wednesdays.

Mr. McKone has done a great job of crafting facial expressions, postures, etc., to complement your character development. Heck, the facial expressions (and those eyes!) he put on Mettle were what really made me love our favorite Hawaiian—and considering the poor guy's face looks like a metallic skull, that's quite the artistic feat!

Now on to a couple of the reasons I decided to write my first letter to a comic book since about age 12:

1) Which character would I like to see in Avengers Academy? One I hope you're already planning to use: Magneto! I realize that Mr. Heinberg is already using him (oh so well!) in Children's Crusade, but I would love to see Quicksilver's secret tutoring of Finesse come to a head with a Magneto appearance.

2) As far as I know, Speedball has never been an Avengers member, so I'm curious: Does being an instructor at Avengers Academy grant him Avengers membership?

3) Any chance of additional students (or instructors) joining? And if so, would you be using already-established characters, new characters, or some of each?

4) Okay, after all of that, you know how much I enjoy your work. But now I do have to express a concern: This book is labeled as rated A which, according to Marvel, means that it's "appropriate for ages 9 and up," so I have to ask: Do we really want 9-year-olds reading about casual sexual relationships between teenagers like Reptil and Finesse? Or implications (albeit probably incorrect ones) of an inappropriate teacher-student relationship between Quicksilver and Finesse?

I love how the comics industry has grown in recent years, how wide and diverse everything is, and how there are books for pretty much every taste. However, I do feel that something has been lost when so many great books just aren't kid-friendly anymore. I would love to see more fun, all-ages-appropriate books in the mainstream Marvel universe—and I'd love for this to be one of them! What better book for kids to be reading than a realistic, character-driven book about teenagers learning and growing into roles as heroes?

But with the way things have been heading in the last few issues, I don't know that, a few years down the road when my wife and I have kids, I'll be able to read this book with them. Whatever your views on teenage sexual activity, I hope we can at least agree that it's an important issue that has definite consequences—consequences that can be life-changing, devastating, and even deadly; consequences that shouldn't be ignored, glossed over, or treated casually.

Maybe I should have more faith in your ability to handle this topic carefully and appropriately, but I felt that I should do my part and at least put my concern out there. If I don't say anything, how will you know people are worried about it, right?

Drew Robbins
Orem, UT

Drew, thanks so much for writing! Your enthusiasm and support are much appreciated… it's already great that you readers buy the book, but encouraging others to read it as well is a wonderful thing in this tough market, when a book's survival really depends on every sale. To address your questions/points:

1) I'd love to bring in Magneto, when/if the other storylines he's involved in make it possible for him to show up!

2) I'm sure Speedball at least has some kind of associate membership. As for being a full Avenger…I'd like to think so, but we'd have to see it confirmed by Steve Rogers.

3) There's always the chance…I'd love to bring in established characters on both sides. But right now the roster is full!

4) This is the point I really want to address, because it's something I've thought about a lot. The depiction of sexual situations (and violence, and other sensitive matters) in this book is something I try to handle as best I can. I don't pretend be an expert on what's appropriate for kids, since I don't have any, and I'm guessing a ten-year-old today knows a lot more about the world than I did at that age. Ultimately, we all try our best to tell compelling stories that deal with sensitive issues appropriately for the book's rating.

In terms of sex, it's a tough line to walk. On one hand, in any story about young people sixteen and up that's meant to have the ring of truth, sex is going to be an issue, as it is in real life. I don't want to ignore that. On the other hand, I agree that there's a right way and a wrong way to handle it. My approach is not to shy away from the issue, but to hopefully present it in a tasteful way, and one that won't offend. I recently re-read an issue of Avengers I bought when I was about ten, and came across a scene in which Starfox and She-Hulk clearly enjoyed a little casual "afternoon delight". At ten, this went right over my head. I knew sex existed, though my concept of it (beyond the mechanics of baby-making) was a vague notion that grown-ups smooched and cuddled. That was fine, but not something I was interested in. Frankly, I was waiting for giant robots to rip off the roof so somebody could hit something. The sexual dynamic was there for adults to notice, but it wasn't explicit, and I'm guessing most kids breezed by it like I did.

So I try to present matters of sex that way: a bit ambiguous, requiring reading between the lines. I never meant for that to come across as "glossing over", although I now realize my approach can backfire, as with the Reptil/Finesse scene. I never intended for them to be having sex…they were making out, not going all the way. But a lot of readers thought they were. Obviously I mishandled that, and I'm sorry. On the other hand, I think in this day and age the concept of student/teacher affairs is, sadly, part of life and news headlines, and I think legitimate to raise (though as you mention it's unfounded here). And as someone who wrote for LAW & ORDER: SVU and has done a lot of research into sex crimes against children, I would say that while some might think addressing child molestation, as I did in Striker's origin story, is going too far, I'd argue that (again, if not too explicit) it could be a good springboard for a parent/child discussion on the danger of child predators…while it's awful that they need to be aware of such threats, knowing it's okay to set boundaries with adults is a kid's first and best line of defense.

Ultimately, I try not to put anything in the book that you wouldn't see on a network TV show at 8:00 pm. But I'm the first to admit I'm far from perfect. At the end of the day, it's going to be – and should be – up to parents to decide what their kids should be exposed to. I think ratings are helpful guidelines, but can't and shouldn't take the place of a caring and attentive parent. Hope that explained things somewhat…and Drew, please do air your concerns! As you said, it's the only way we'll know about them!

Now an excerpt from another great letter – and again, Paul, sorry I had to trim it! Paul weighs in on who he'd like to see show up in this book:

I have always had a special feeling for the Taskmaster. I always thought there was something very special about him…it's a match made in hero heaven with the Taskmaster and Avengers Academy!

Paul A. Cassenelli
Alexandria, MN

Paul, I couldn't agree more…which is why Taskmaster appears in our very next issue! Hope to see you there!

Christos Gage

NEXT!

Send e-mail to
MHEROES@MARVEL.COM
(please mark as OKAY TO PRINT)

MARVEL
AGE OF X
WHAT YOU KNEW WAS WRONG!
JANUARY 2011

AGE OF X FILES WITH MASTERMIND MIKE CAREY

MARVEL: For those new to Age of X, what's it all about?

MIKE CAREY: It's about the last few mutants surviving on planet Earth fighting a last-ditch – and a seemingly hopeless battle for survival against an army that's to all intents and purposes infinite. When we meet them, they've been fighting for three years and there's no end in sight. From the confines of Fortress X, they go out into the field each day to fend off the latest wave of attacks, with no respite and terrible attrition. This is against the backdrop of a world that's never known the X-Men, or any other mutant super team – a world that's not even familiar with the concept of mutant heroes. Disorganized, isolated and helpless, most mutants have been picked off one by one, along with non-powered bearers of the X-gene and anyone who stood up to defend them. This is the last fight, and it's entering its final phase.

MARVEL: We've seen alternate stories before, but this is something completely different than anything we've seen before—how would you differentiate it?

MC: In a way, that's a question that can only be answered by the story itself – or after the story itself. There's a lot more going on here than we initially see. We present a situation, but we don't explain how it relates to the normal Marvel universe, or where it diverged from it. And then, at a certain point, we do. The answer is – I hope and believe – a million miles away from anything that readers will be expecting.

MARVEL: You've got a large cast of characters. Which have been your favorite to write? Any surprises?

MC: I always love writing Rogue, Gambit, Magneto. I've loved writing Basilisk, and I think you'll see why when you learn more about him. You won't believe what's been done to him, and what he's become. Writing Frenzy as a hero was very cool: so was writing a darker, more worldly wise version of Pixie, and a version of Cannonball who's basically expanded into a leadership role not occupied – in this world, never occupied – by Cyclops. The coolest thing, in fact, has been re-inventing the characters, and exploring how this world might have twisted them out of shape without changing who they essentially are.

MARVEL: There are no X-Men in this world, but the mutants have a unique mission that brings them together. Can you tell us a bit about that?

MC: It's purely a matter of survival - both for themselves and for their race. In the Alpha issue, we see the raw beginnings of a sort of comradeship that hasn't really existed up to this point – the sense of unity, as the hunted loners come together and discover for the first time how much more they can be. Arising out of that, within the main story arc, there's a mission that has to do with finding out a truth that's been very well hidden, and then dealing with the appalling consequences. There's a sense in which the army outside Fortress X if far from being the biggest problem they have to deal with – and the threat to mutant survival is a small part of a much big ger threat.

MARVEL: We've also heard you've developed a pretty intricate mythology for this reality. How much of this will we see play out in AoX? Anything particularly shocking or surprising you can hint at?

MC: There's a backstory which is huge, yeah – and some of it we only get through hearsay, as stories that the mutants tell each other around the campfires or in the bars at night when they're resting up from battle. Part of that is the origin of Fortress X itself, which is pretty insane and another part is how the world got into this state, with anti-mutant forces ruling with an iron fist. Outside of that, we've also got the origin stories of the characters themselves, some of which we see in the Alpha issue, and the unexpected role that non-mutant heroes have played in the genesis of the Fortress and the survival of the mutants. It's a really intricate and rich tapestry, and most of it will be seen or described at some point, with some little pieces of the jigsaw left to be inferred.

MARVEL: This is the first major crossover you've helmed at Marvel. Can you describe the experience?

MC: Well, I was heavily involved in Messiah Complex and Second Coming, too – but yeah, this time I get the whole toybox. It's an incredible feeling: a feeling of gathering momentum that's had editor Daniel Ketchum and I laughing slightly crazed laughs at each other over the phone. "We're gonna be able to do that? Okay, that's totally fantastic! Wait, BY WHEN???" The great thing is just being completely in control of all the story beats. It's a different kind of pleasure from the adrenaline-charged baton-passing of a crossover like Second Coming, with four creative teams and a weekly schedule. Seriously, I can't remember the last time I got this big a kick out of a single story.

MARVEL: Finally, let's talk Clay Mann designs. What makes him so perfect for this story?

MC: Clay's just amazing at coming up with the right visuals to embody and define this world. Right from the start, his character sketches just left me ecstatic. They not only gave me what I was asking for, but played off the central ideas of the story in spectacular and inspired ways. You look at these people and you want to know who they are and what their stories are. Plus, he gets the sense of huge scale, effortlessly. And I'm going to go out on a limb and say that he and Steve Kurth make for a great team-up: different styles, but beautifully complementary.